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Tattooing in the Marquesas

By Willowdean Chatterson Handy

INTRODUCTION

Drawings and photographs of tattooing patterns on the bodies of natives were made by the author during a residence in the Marquesas Islands in 1921. As tattooing is now forbidden by the laws of the country and the art is consequently dying out, this collection of the last specimens of tattooing patterns which exist today in the Marquesas has seemed to demand a complementary collection of information regarding the practice of the art, to the end that the beautiful motives might at least be partly accounted for and might some day take their merited place in the history of art. The data have been drawn from natives who have been decorated, from one old *tuhuna*, or artist, who has practised tattooing, and from literary sources, thus piecing together a fairly accurate picture of the practice. Discussion of the design itself, of which the natives know nothing today beyond the nomenclature, is undertaken in a spirit of appreciation and with the hope that the suggestions offered regarding the evolution and significance of this form of decoration may uncover other possibilities and lead to a more conclusive interpretation of the art.

THE PRACTICE OF THE ART

It would appear that this form of body decoration was not confined to certain ranks or classes in the Marquesas, though what might be called a property qualification limited somewhat the complete covering and finer work to the wealthy who could afford to employ the best artists and stand the attendant expense of feeding them and their assistants as well as the large band of *ka'ioi* who erected the special house for the occasion. A father prepared long in advance for the payment for tattooing of his first-born, raising pigs, and planting *ute*, paper mulberry *(Broussonetia papyrifera)*, for the making of tapa as gifts for both the *ka'ioi* and the *tuhuna*. Payment also took the form of ornaments, war clubs, and more recently, guns. Langsdorff says that they paid for their decorations according to the greater or less quantity of them, and to the trouble the figures required; that during the thirty or forty years when the body was gone over again and again with the tattooing bones until the skin was completely covered, the cost became considerable; and that such all-over decoration necessarily indicated a person of great wealth (10 p. 120)[1]. It follows

[1] Throughout this paper the numbers in parentheses refer to the bibliography on page 26.